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Delaware's Decision

A report from the Coons-O'Donnell debate.

Commentary by Pete du Pont
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Everyone in this state knew that Rep. Mike Castle was going to be our next U.S. senator. He had served as a state legislator, lieutenant governor (during my second term as governor), governor and nine-term congressman. He was well ahead in the primary and general-election polls. But in the Republican primary on Sept. 14, Christine O'Donnell won by a bit more than 3,500 votes.

As everyone in Delaware also knew, New Castle County Executive Chris Coons, the Democratic Party's Senate candidate, had no chance of beating Mr. Castle. But he was quickly some 15 points ahead of Ms. O'Donnell.

So last week I attended two O'Donnell-Coons debates and saw a campaign that could determine which party will be in the Senate majority. Mr. Coons has been elected three times to New Castle County office; Ms. O'Donnell has not won an election, though this is her third Senate run. But she has raised more campaign money--\$3.8 million to his \$1.3 million in their Sept. 30 reports. He is a real liberal, and she is a real conservative. President Obama came to town for Mr. Coons on Friday, and it seems likely Sarah Palin will likely be here for Ms. O'Donnell at the end of October, just before the election.

The debates showed that public policy positions of the two candidates are real, substantive and very different. The University of Delaware debate was run by CNN's Wolf Blitzer, who said when it ended that Ms. O'Donnell was the overall winner because "she didn't come across as just a weirdo or anything like that."

When Mr. Blitzer asked Mr. Coons, "Did you increase taxes as the county executive?" Mr. Coons ducked the question. But he did in fact increase property taxes in New Castle County, by 48%. And his website says "High-Income Bush Tax Cuts Should Expire on Schedule," so he would raise federal tax rates, too. In the debate, Mr. Coons said that "every increased tax cut, every extension that's given is going to cost, it's going to increase the deficit."

In truth, Delaware's state income tax rate reductions in the 1970s through the '90s--cutting them in half, and then again in half--increased income-tax receipts by more than 300%. The 2001 and 2003 Bush tax cuts--the ones that will expire Jan. 1 unless Congress acts--also raised receipts, by \$608 billion over four years. Lower tax rates have proved to be good for America, and higher tax rates would hurt it. Ms. O'Donnell would vote not to raise the Bush tax rates and also proposes a two-year tax holiday on capital gains to encourage reinvestment in business. She would also eliminate the death tax that goes up in January.

Mr. Coons also favors "a nationwide cap-and-trade program" so that government would regulate and tax our energy consumption and use. Such a bill passed the House last year on a 219-212 vote, and it contained substantial government regulation of our economy--on energy, wages, imported goods, corporations, states, cities, buildings, houses and so on. It would also allow the government to impose tariffs on foreign goods from nations that did not sign on to global warming control. Ms. O'Donnell opposes it: "Nobody wants this bill. This bill is a national energy tax that will ration energy use and increase our utility bills." She is right. It would mean a huge government takeover of the economy.

On health care, they differ too. Mr. Coons admitted ObamaCare is "not perfect. There are problems with it." But he insisted it "was a critical piece of legislation" that should not be repealed. Ms. O'Donnell argues that "we were promised that [the law] would make more people insured," but points out "recent CBO reports say it is not" having that effect. We were promised it would mean that "health care costs would be lowered. It hasn't. It has increased health care costs." She worries that the government can now say "what kind of treatment a doctor can and can't do" and "what kind it will fund." She favors repeal and then the enactment of real reform. And she favors an important health-care change: allowing health care policies to be purchased across state lines, which would lower costs by introducing competition

On immigration, they are in some agreement. Both believe that securing our borders should be a top priority, but Mr. Coons favors a "path towards legal residence" for those here illegally who "do not commit further crimes."

On the controversial issue of "don't ask, don't tell," Mr. Coons says that repealing it "is an important next step in the civil rights movement," and he would "move swiftly" to do so. Ms. O'Donnell's view: "It's up to the military to set the policy that the military believes is in the best interest of unit cohesiveness and military readiness."

They both agree that offshore drilling should not be permitted off the coast of Delaware, and that whether the mosque should be built on Ground Zero in New York city is up to the local authorities.

Finally, in any election there is a lot of colorful but irrelevant political stuff. In college Mr. Coons labeled himself a "bearded Marxist," and Ms. O'Donnell long ago said she had "dabbled into witchcraft" while in high school.

On Election Day the question is: Who will help correct the negative policies that have hurt our nation over the past few years? One of the candidates supports almost all of them; the other favors policies that would make us more successful in the future. Two weeks from now we have a very important election in America's First State that could change the direction of our country.